

More on *Phyllanthus*

by Colette Jacono

In this issue, George Wilder and Michael Sowinski present *Phyllanthus fluitans* as a recent addition to Florida's aquatic environment. While beautiful in structure and unique in adaptations, we cannot expect this "one more" introduced species to be celebrated by land managers already stretched to the limit in working resources. Yet, let's step back from these practical implications and take the opportunity to further explore that which our authors have so well introduced — the interesting botanical features of the genus *Phyllanthus*. We can do this by examining two terrestrial, weedy species that also are introduced and very common to observe in late summer through fall throughout the state, *Phyllanthus urinaria* (chamber bitter) and *P. tenellus* (the Mascarene Island leafflower).

Both *Phyllanthus urinaria* and *P. tenellus* germinate each summer from seeds established in the soil. Homeowners typically notice seedlings in gaps within St. Augustine grass as the lawn begins to decline from the rigors of summer climate and with the onset of shorter days. By referencing the key to species in the genus *Phyllanthus* offered in Dick Wunderlin's Guide to the Vascular Plants of Florida, we will quickly recognize these two terrestrial species from the aquatic *P. fluitans* by the absence of leaves on the main stem. The terrestrial species instead have a naked stem that extends straight upright, and distinctly horizontal branches from which the simple, individual leaves are held in alternate arrangement from each other. From above, as these small, herbaceous plants are usually viewed, the horizontal, leaf holding branches are often mistaken as compound leaves, perhaps of a species in the pea family (Fig. A and C). Closing in with a hand lens on the lower part of the branches will reveal, however, each entire leaf, a flower, and soon after, a tiny capsule all emerging from a subtending node (Fig. B and D). From this close vantage point is where *P. urinaria* may be distinguished from its relative, *P. tenellus*, as the capsules of the former are closely attached to the branch (Fig B.), while the latter has stalks that hold the flowers and capsules away from the branch (Fig D.). The capsules of both of these species can produce six seeds each, which serve as the source for next year's plants. Offer a gap or disturbance for their regeneration and off we go into the life cycle of an annual, weedy, introduced plant.

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Figure A. *Phyllanthus urinaria*



Fig B. *Phyllanthus urinaria*



Fig C. *Phyllanthus tenellus*

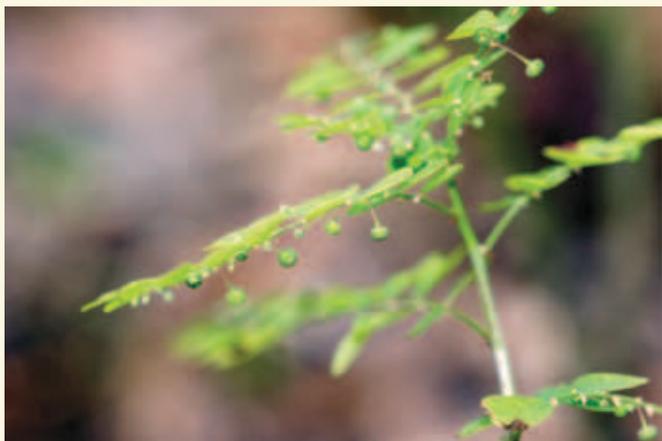


Fig. D. *Phyllanthus tenellus*